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efore his tragic death from AIDS in 1986, Michael Taylor defined the “California Look.” Large (and larger)-scale furniture; neutral palettes; wicker used indoors; nature’s sculptural bounty, ranging from gi-normous geodes and towering *Ficus Benjamina* to tree trunks with three-foot diameters reborn as coffee tables, all bathed in acres of natural light.

Who today might well be considered a leading trailblazer in the Taylor tradition? Meet San Francisco-based designer James Marzo, whose love of nature — both as inspirational bedrock and as an instructor advocating unexpected combinations of proportion, form and utility — complements an erudition that includes the history of design and architecture (East, West and many points between) alongside a hands-on knowledge of how actually to make and restore stuff — be that a piece in the style of a French *ébéniste* or an American modernist or a something entirely new and original.



Midwesterner by birth (he's from Wisconsin), Marzo evidenced an early appreciation for nature that was encouraged and honed by his family. Manifested first in a simple love of the outdoors — the rugged coasts along Lakes Michigan and Superior, the patchwork fields and rolling hills, the massive mixed hardwood and coniferous forests — his sensibility

served to educate his eye, yielding an early sensitivity to texture and light, their subtle transitions, and a delight in distinguishing the forest *and* the trees as both discrete and composite forms, as well as part of a larger perspective that might include the Midwest's big-sky cumulus clouds. From such calibrated fantasy it was but a small, precocious step to the Prairie School style of architecture — particularly that belonging to Frank Lloyd Wright, in whose work Marzo took an early interest-cum-obsession. "As a young boy, I'd organize family trips to Wright's buildings, first near then far," Marzo says. "I was fascinated by organic design and how his unique homes seemed to emerge, then grow from their natural sites."

James Marzo designed a 10-foot-tall, custom four-poster bed in bronze and Italian leather for a classically inspired, yet modern feeling, master bedroom.





In a Pacific Heights house, found industrial objects complement an important collection of modern art. Salvaged laundry-machinery bases have been reborn as sculptural consoles, which seem to converse with the Rodin figure beyond.



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Marzo was discouraged from entering a creative field. Economic safety lay in the professional trades, a “Dr.” before the surname or an “Esq.” after. So at Stanford University he studied economics and psychology. But design was never far from mind or

hand. Marzo took studio art classes, drawing and, with even greater passion, sculpture. And while he might have spent a summer in a pre-law program at Oxford taught by Stanford and Oxford professors, he lived and studied at Cliveden, the fabled 19th-century Italianate mansion combining English Palladianism and Roman Renaissance architecture, and former country home to the Anglo-American Astor family, which in the 1970s served as an overseas Stanford campus.

“I used to study in a small pavilion in the Japanese tea garden,” Marzo says, adding that while he did well academically, “it’s a miracle, because every weekend I visited a different country house.” Likewise, while spending a term at the Stanford villa in Florence, Mom and Dad might have thought Jim was immersed exclusively in the treatises of Machiavelli and history of the Medici, but he was wallowing, neck deep and delighted, in the city’s art collections and architecture as well.

An intimate San Francisco dining room is enlivened by 18th-century Italian furniture, striped silk-taffeta window coverings and a sunburst-patterned terrazzo floor.

For a condominium atop Russian Hill, antiques, custom-designed furnishings, an ancient mammoth tusk and a sculpture by Bay Area artist Manuel Neri hold their own against a commanding view of the San Francisco skyline.





neverbly, decorative push came to artful shove. By the latter part of his senior year, Marzo decided he had no choice but to dive headfirst into design. The result of much deliberation, the course he chose was, characteristically, rigorous and thorough. Ensuring that he would build upon knowledge gained through his studies, his first job was a two-year stint at Randolph & Hein, which was one of the West Coast's premier furniture manufacturers.

As production manager, Marzo learned the many intricacies of antique restoration and the highly detailed expertise required in designing and producing the finest quality custom furniture. This apprenticeship meant training in the Old-World methods of hand carving, water gilding, French polish finishing, and upholstering with horsehair and hand-tied springs. Once Marzo felt he had "graduated" from this arena, he proceeded to another: the antiques firm Therien & Company, where he headed the in-house Interior Design Department, steeping himself in the study and conservation of antiques. After several more years, feeling himself tried and proven, he launched James Marzo Design in 1985.



James Marzo. Photo by Judy Dater



Such a “take-no-shortcuts” approach has served Marzo well. Not only did it accomplish the obvious — rendering him fluent in design history and furniture construction, allowing him to fabricate a made-to-measure piece if an original proved unobtainable — it also opened doors. In 1993, he was chosen to oversee the restoration of the antiques collection of Gordon and Ann Getty, one of the finest private collections in the United States. Additionally, it gave him an expert’s comfort when adding to his clients’ collections (or building entire collections from scratch). “I’ve found not only great pieces but incredible value,” Marzo says, adding that he currently sees great opportunities in the markets for 18th- and 19th-century French and Continental furniture in particular. However, regardless of market conditions and bargains, he says, “there is never a reason to compromise or settle for anything less than the superlative.”

And his expertise has served to distinguish him from his peers. “Jim has a distinctive design voice made richer and absolutely unique by his knowledge of antiques and his restraint,” notes the august designer John Saladino. “Plus, he’s a young man fashioned from the old school of gentlemanly manners.”

Neoclassical antiques elegantly fill a San Francisco house designed by Julia Morgan. The “bookcase” is an 18th-century trompe-l’oeil from the Paris Opera stage.

M

Marzo's experience also gave him the courage to explore his own perspective and aesthetic vision. Marzo had no qualms about using 80-grit sandpaper in a San Francisco designer showcase house as backdrop for a Sheraton sideboard, a Régence mirror, a rock crystal chandelier, 18th-century Belgian

tapestry and a 17th-century lacquer cabinet. "I had to contact 3M [the conglomerate manufacturer of the sandpaper] to get uncut rolls [as opposed to the small squares normally available for over-the-counter purchase]," he says. For Marzo, the humble material became "an 'industrial' wallcovering made from crushed carnets."

Marzo combines a Louis XVI bureau plat, a contemporary painting by Jeff Long, an Italian ceramic lamp from the '50s and a Robsjohn-Gibbings klismos chair.





N

or does Marzo blanche when challenged with others' unorthodox combos. One client has collections of sculpture (Rodin, Henry Moore), paintings (Chagall, Monet) *and* salvaged industrial objects. Marzo, himself a collector of industrial design since the early 1980s (way before the hard line between the fine, decorative and industrial arts began to blur), responded by placing consoles made from cast-iron cage-like turnstiles that once admitted soccer fans to a Manchester stadium, mere feet from an important Russian Expressionist painting by Jawlensky and a crescent-shaped macassar ebony French Art-Deco daybed.

A cast-iron English cobbler's bench reborn as a side table sits next to a leather armchair by 20th-century Danish designer Fritz Henningsen. Sinuously elegant consoles made from vintage laundry-machine parts salvaged in Chicago are paired with a sculpture by contemporary artist Bruce Nauman and chairs by André Arbus. "Without regard to period or provenance, I have a strong interest in intrinsic beauty and sculptural form," he says. "Found objects add a freshness and originality to many of my designs."

Marzo marvelously pairs an armchair by Fritz Henningsen with an old iron English cobbler's bench that he's transformed into an end table. The paintings are by Lucio Fontana (left) and Claude Monet.

One of a pair of Scottish antler armchairs sits beneath engravings by Georges Rouault.



Although Marzo dubs himself a “modern classicist” (meaning he knows and respects the rules of scale and proportion but is unafraid to tweak, even break them), he says he has recently become, following a series of perspective-changing trips to Kyoto, Japan, “far less interested in static symmetry, far more interested in negative space, shadow, intrinsic harmony. Absence.” This new tributary has been explored in Marzo’s 3,400-square-foot weekend house in Sonoma County’s Valley of the Moon.

Perched on five acres, part of what was the prominent California Spreckels’ family’s Sonoma “farm” (but actually a rambling Beaux-Arts-style estate with multiple buildings on hundreds of acres) Marzo’s property has pristine, uninterrupted views across the valley. “Not that I knew it when I bought it,” he says with a laugh, explaining how he has, over the last five years, removed trees, relocated trees, pruned trees; shaped landscapes, and carved out terraces and pathways delineating discrete quadrants. “It was an overgrown poison oak-infested forest.” Now he’s planning to add huge boulders to the vista. “I’ve always been more a sculptor than a painter,” he says. “The art of stone placement provides the ultimate lesson in form, proportion and composition.”





Communing with the nature of his land, Marzo has also been considering the house. “It’s a gift to be in no hurry, to study the light, landscape and house as a whole, to have the opportunity to treat the parts as elements of one puzzle. It’s something I want to start doing at a very serious level for my clients as well,” he says. “I am inspired to bring back the too-often-lost, Sukiya tradition of seamlessly integrating the garden and home, and have become obsessed with Japanese garden design, finding many subtle yet profound artistic lessons in this scholarly and artistic pursuit.”

Inside, there are original pieces by mid-century Danish and French designers Kaare Klint, Maxime Old and Jean Royère. A 19th-century French articulated drafting table, an 18th-century Venetian gondola chair and Jean Prouvé-style coffee table also punctuate the space along with, what Marzo calls, “many unique salvaged industrial and natural objects.” There is also much color, but the spectrum is limited. “Although I love color and do at times use it quite boldly, color can dominate form, and sometimes dilute the beauty of individual objects or works of art, and can overpower the subtleties of form and composition,” he explains.

A pair of John Dickinson side chairs preside over a dressing room designed by modern classicist James Marzo. Manuel Neri's sculpture peeks in.

f Marzo has assumed the mantle of Michael Taylor in many ways, he differs from the late designer as well. Taylor stated, "When you take things out, you must increase the size of what's left." Marzo prefers "to increase the artistic presence or quality of furnishings used in an edited interior — a great piece of art or furniture doesn't have to be large to hold a space," he says. "Although it's usually better to be over scale than under, Michael may have pushed scale too far for me."

"Bigger isn't always better and sometimes the lessons from a whisper, although not heard by everyone, can be the most profound."

Marzo lives quietly, too. He is modest, soft-spoken and discreet. He feels his passions keenly, and is committed to creating what he calls "enduring, comfortable, beautiful interiors" about which his clients are passionate. "The heart skipping beat, the shortness of breath felt for a moment with the recognition of true, timeless beauty — that's what I work for, that's my greatest reward," he says, forthright and forceful before, ever so slightly, leaning back in his chair, lest he appear too ... too.

Erudite, sensitive, a modern classicist, innovator and an envelope pusher — that's James Marzo and those are his interiors. He's just too quietly confident to shout about either.



The designer at home in Sonoma, California. Inspired by Japanese garden design, Marzo has pruned a grove of California Redwoods to punctuate distant views of the Valley of the Moon.

WHERE WILL YOUR *Style Compass* LEAD US?



Aretha Franklin

>> LISTEN

GIFT:

Casablanca lilies, bundles of fresh Sonoma lavender, Champagne, tea from Mariage Frères, art books and music.

BOOK:

On my nightstand now are: *Shots in the Dark: Japan, Zen, and the West (Buddhism and Modernity)* by Shoji Yamada; *New Garden Design: Inspiring Private Paradises* by Zahid Sardar; *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen.



MUSIC:

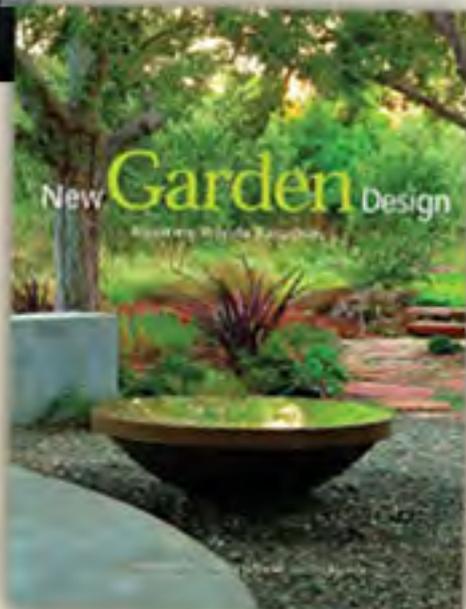
Sarah Vaughan, Shirley Horn, Rosa Passos, Montserrat Caballé, and **Aretha**.

SHOP:

Therien & Co in San Francisco and Los Angeles, Masion Gerard in New York, Hervé Van der Straeten in Paris, and Artefact Design and Salvage in Sonoma.

GARDENING:

I find many lessons and great inspiration from Japanese gardens. In Japan, garden designs are a three-dimensional, living art form. I have consumed every book and treatise on this fascinating subject, and have traveled throughout the world studying and experiencing Japanese gardens. I am now a regular contributor to the *Journal of Japanese Gardening*.



TRAVEL:

Travel educates the eye and delights the soul. In addition to the usual jaunts to Paris, London, New York, and Los Angeles, I have also explored **Myanmar**, Cambodia, Japan, China, Bhutan and Nepal in the past few years.

ARTISTS WHO INSPIRE YOU:

John Saladino, Axel Vervoordt, Kengo Kuma, Luis Barragan, Isamu Noguchi, Jože Plečnik, and Carlo Scarpa.

FAVORITE DESIGN SOURCE:

Wyeth in New York. Love their pieces on *1stdibs*.

COLOR:

Nature is the best instructor. Tropical birds and fish provide the most adventurous lessons.

WHERE WILL YOUR *Style Compass* LEAD US?

HOW GREEN ARE YOU?

We always try to use environmentally conscious solutions in our work. Although often overlooked by magazines, timeless design is one of the most fundamental of green concepts. I would like to think that our designs stand the test of time and provide our clients with enduring beauty, comfort and value. I always encourage clients to purchase quality before quantity, and to invest in art and furnishings that can be enjoyed for a lifetime.

An unexpected green solution is to bring new life to existing materials. For adventurous clients, I have created unique sculptural furnishings from industrial found objects, recycling in an artistic way. It doesn't matter to me if it comes from an old factory or from the finest gallery — I take profound joy in finding beauty in unexpected places.



FABRIC:

For special projects, we source unusual old textiles or have custom fabrics milled. Sabina Fay Braxton does intricate modern brocades. Macondo in New York can produce incredible silk embroideries for a few pillows or an entire room. I often use ancient abstract textile fragments framed as art.

ENTERTAINING:

I do most of my entertaining at my country home in the **Sonoma Valley**. I prefer intimate, casual gatherings for family and friends.

FASHION:

I find inspiration in classic Balenciaga and Dior, as well as **Ralph Rucci**. For fashion equals art: Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto.



HOTEL:

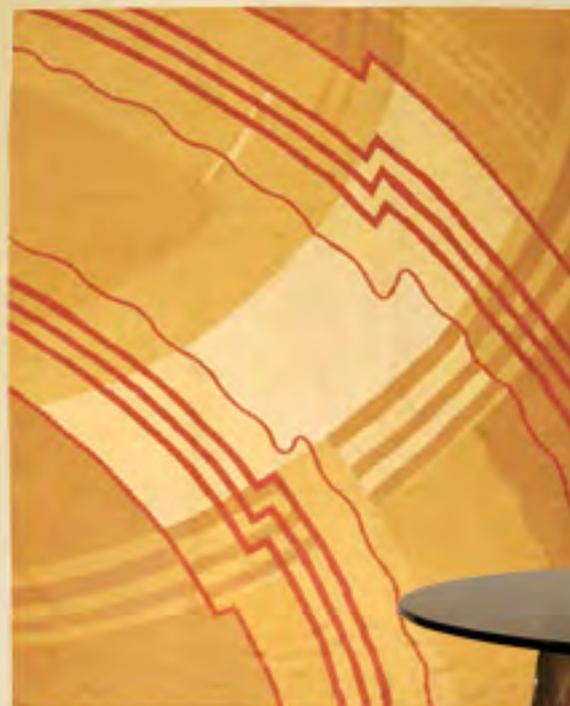
I've had the pleasure of doing several projects for the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group. For service, the Oriental in Bangkok still sets the standard throughout Asia. For the most quietly elegant and sophisticated experience, the 300-year-old Tawaraya ryokan in Kyoto is unsurpassed.

JAMES
MARZO

Quick Picks
FROM *Istdibs*



Arm Chair in Mahogany by
Jack Rogers Hopkins, offered
by Todd Merrill Antiques



Antique French Art Deco Rug,
offered by Nazmiyal



Upholstered Oak Bullhorn Hans
Wegner, offered by Wyeth



A Round Modernist Coffee Table
in Steel and Smoked Glass,
offered by Galerie Van Den Akker



Vladimir Kagan's Iconic
Floating Sofa, offered by
Lost City Arts



Persimmon Enameled Steel Bowl
by Hanova Of California, offered
by Assemblage Ltd.

